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SUBJECT: ESTONIA: VE DAY REMAINS DIVISIVE

¶1. On May 8 approximately 200 World War II veterans gathered at Tallinn's Maarjamae memorial to mark the anniversary of the end of the war. The event was organized by the Estonian War Veterans Association, an umbrella group that includes veterans associations from both Soviet and German units. Defense Minister Jurgen Ligi laid a wreath commemorating all of Estonia's war dead. In the event, the vast majority of participants were veterans of German units. Ligi reportedly told the group their fight against the advancing Red Army in 1944 was "a fight for Estonia's freedom." Speakers included MPs Mart Laar and Trivimi Velliste.

¶2. On May 9 an estimated 600 people (mostly Russian-speakers) gathered at a Red Army monument ("the bronze soldier") in downtown Tallinn to celebrate Victory Day. The Russian Ambassador laid a wreath at the monument. While the event was largely peaceful there were minor confrontations between participants and two Estonian protesters, one of whom paraded around the gathering with a poster reading "This soldier occupied our country and deported our people." The Estonian flag of the second was apparently desecrated and the police escorted both men away for their own safety.

¶3. The Pro Patria Union faction of the Tallinn City Council submitted a bill at the beginning of May which calls for the removal of the Red Army monument from its present location. A fringe group that includes the instigator of the short-lived Lihula SS memorial, Tiit Madisson, said on May 10 that the "Bronze Soldier" will "no longer be standing" on the next anniversary of Estonian independence. The group did not specify how it would accomplish its goal, nor is this the first time that more nationalistically-inclined Estonians have sought the monument's removal.

¶4. Comment: This year's commemorations were lower-key affairs than the 2005 60th anniversary celebrations. But reconciling the competing views of history will remain a challenge for Estonia -- at least as long as there are surviving veterans.

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